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ABSTRACT

Addressed primarily to teachers of speech communication, this paper suggests further emphasis on three important aims of education. The first objective is the development of an educational focus which stresses the unitary nature of knowledge, making speech courses more interdisciplinary. The second objective is the appropriate use of new knowledge by the appraisal of evidence, the drawing of inferences, and the probing of alternatives. The third objective is the development of the ability to think critically about what is known in order to avoid error and misjudgment. It is concluded that teachers of speech have a unique opportunity to stress the humanity of education and to prepare students for their collective future. (TS)

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THE MODERN TOWER OF BABEL

AND THE

SPEECH TEACHER'S RESPONSIBILITY

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The Bicentennial of the nation is upon us. As we reflect on our past, many stirring voices remind us of our heritage: "Hold your fire until you see the whites of their eyes," . . . "Give me liberty or give me death," . . . "United we stand, divided we fall," . . . "Remember the Alamo," . . . "54 - 40 or fight," . . . "Remember Pearl Harbor," . . . "Millions for defense but not one cent for tribute," . . . "We must make the world safe for democracy," . . . "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," . . . "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition," . . . "We must never negotiate from fear, but let us never fear to negotiate," . . . "I have a dream," . . . "Ask not what your country can do for you," . . . "There are no more Gibralters," . . . "Uneasy is the peace that wears a nuclear crown." Most of these phrases captured, at least

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for the moment, the thoughts, hopes, or concerns of a great people. A few of the phrases have survived to mock us. We shall undoubtedly have some new phrase to mark our Bicentennial coined perhaps by a ghost writer, professional wordmonger, or perhaps some authentic spokesman of the people. We Americans are rarely at a loss for words!

Our problem today, however, is not the lack of mechanical cliches--authentic or contrived. Rather, it is the confusion of voices, the babble of tongues, the immersion in the mythology of words, the blandishment of the image makers, the siren voice of the "bitch goddess of success" which lures us to a modern Tower of Babel.

Northrop Frye in his interesting essay on "The Vocation of Eloquence," uses the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel to illuminate man's present predicament:

> The civilization we live in at present is a gigantic technological structure, a skyscraper almost high enough to reach the moon. It looks like a single worldwide effort, but it's really a deadlock of rivalries; it looks very impressive, except that it has no genuine human dignity. For all its wonderful machinery, we know it's really a crazy ramshackle building, and at any time may crash around our ears. What the myth tells us is that the Tower of Babel is a work of human imagination, that its main elements are words, and that what will make it collapse is a confusion of tongues. All had originally one language, the myth says. That language is not English or Russian or Chinese or any common ancestor, if there was one. It is the language of human nature, the language that

> makes both Shakespeare and Pushkin authentic poets, that gives a social vision to both Lincoln and Gandhi. It never speaks unless we take the time to listen . . . . And then all it has to tell us, when we look over the edge of our leaning tower, is that we are not getting any nearer heaven . . . .[1]

Several decades earlier Sir Richard Livingstone, Vice Chancellor of the University of Oxford, called attention to the same problem: "We are advanced, united, international, in our material civilization; when we pass beyond it, Babel begins--in our relations with others and even within ourselves."[2]

There can be little doubt that there is a confusion of tongues, the rise of a modern Tower of Babel, and just at the time we thought we were approaching heaven. For the past two decades we have "sold" education--elementary, secondary, and higher education as the shortest and surest way to the "good life." But now we are not sure--not sure, at least, that the multiplication of knowledge is enough. We have had a "credibility gap" for a decade, and more recently "all the King's men" have let us down. Those responsible for the credibility gap and our present anguish were the products of our educational system--elementary through university.

One of the most disturbing paragraphs I have read recently was penned by the late Supreme Court Justice Jackson who noted:

> It is one of the paradoxes of our times that modern society needs to fear little except men, and what is worse, it needs to fear only the educated men. The

> most serious crimes are committed only by educated men and technically competent people. . . If education is to be the instrument of our improvement, it should be constantly aware of its mission.[3]

This is a serious indictment and only partially valid, but it is sufficiently accurate to warrant our concern.

Wherein has the educational process failed? For two decades, or since Sputnik, our clear and firm concern has been for the intellectual and exploratory aims of education. Stated another way, we have wanted to know more about more and more; and, barring a catastrophe of major dimensions, this unparalleled growth in knowledge will continue at an ever accelerating rate. Indeed, as Kenneth Boulding observes, "The growth of knowledge is one of the most irreversible forces known to mankind."[4]

If American education is to be evaluated in terms of its contribution to the sum total of human knowledge, it must be rated as an unqualified success. Wherein then have we failed? Is not the acquisition of knowledge on the part of student and scholar <u>the</u> purpose of education? We have proceeded for two decades largely on the assumption that it is. Were we wrong? Poet-critic Archibald MacLeish would argue that we have to some extent missed the mark, that education's concern for "man" as such as grown less and less and its concern with "subjects" has grown greater. Universities and schools no longer exist, he contends, "to produce man <u>qua</u> man, men prepared for a life in a society of men, but men

as specialized experts. . . ."[5] If MacLeish is correct, what is missing in our preparation of men for "life in a society of men?"

At the risk of oversimplification of a very complex problem, I would suggest three neglected aims of education that we now approach only in an amateurish or haphazard way. In addition to advancing the intellectual and exploratory aims of education where we have demonstrated proficiency, I would urge first the development of an educational focus which would stress the unitary nature of knowledge. We think as if, talk as if, and teach as if human knowledge could be neatly compartmentalized. This habitual mode of thought and language has created an artificial conceptual hiatus between scholars representing different bodies of knowledge. Harry Ransom contends that such specialization breeds "close-ended, proprietary, and expedient specializers who are comforted by narrow intellectual security."[6] More importantly, however, such narrow specialization is likely to cause us to overlook the essential interrelatedness of all knowledge and the interplay which exists between disciplines. We may for convenience in teaching confine biology, literature, economics, government, agriculture, military science, and human communication to different curricular structures and assign their teaching to specialists; but the impact of one discipline upon another in the real world cannot be ignored nor treated haphazardly. Human knowledge is interdisciplinary. Discipline

impinges upon discipline for our benefit, detriment, or confusion.

What is the speech teacher's opportunity for bridging the territory between the great bodies of knowledge that we term the natural sciences, humanities, and social sciences? Historically, interdisciplinary concerns are not alien to the field of speech. From the beginning, the interests of speech scholars have embraced a variety of disciplines including logic, philosophy, politics, ethics, literature, history, religion, and so on. More recently we have found kindred interests in psychology, medicine, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, and the new electronic media. In fact, the diversity of our concerns has led some to the conclusion that speech is a "catchall discipline" or no discipline at all.[7] A more reasoned view of the discipline of speech, however, perceives it as interdisciplinary by virtue of the multiplicity of systems with which it deals. Speech scholars occupy a territory overlapping the boundaries of the natural sciences, humanities, and social sciences. In public address we must concern ourselves with the great deliberative issues of the social sciences in the context of our own humane discipline. Likewise, the new electronic media involves us in all three of the great traditional bodies of knowledge. Oral interpretation and theatre call for our interrelating the humanities and fine arts. Communication pathology draws upon the natural and social sciences. Thus, the speech teacher, perhaps more than other

teachers, has the opportunity to interrelate the broader disciplines of human knowledge; and this interrelationship contributes to a larger learning--a larger learning which can, to some degree, disspell the confusion of tongues and keep our Tower of Babel from fragmenting.

Our quest for new knowledge and the resulting emphasis on the intellectual and exploratory aims of education has distracted to some extent our educational concern for the appropriate use of new knowledge. This is another dimension of education that we neglect to our own peril. General Omar Bradley put this problem in perspective when he complained, "We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience." Marjorie Carpenter of Stephens College spoke for many of us when she expressed her personal conviction that we need to rethink our approach to our subject matter and our students. She notes:

> Idealogical warfare is a recognized force; the change in the rate of change is phenomenal. Citizens who can think critically about new developments and who can weigh comparative values in our present social structure are a necessity. Education which does not take this into account is failing us as a nation. It is even possible that there can be neither intellectual integrity nor freedom unless we insist upon critical thinking about our own attitudes towards the discoveries of our time. . . .[8]

The critical or evaluative factor in education has been partially lost by the acceleration of change, the loss of a sense of history, the belief that all values are relative, and the complexity of society which leads to a division of responsibility in institutional and disciplinary functions--a division that leaves important aspects of education unattended.

What may be needed is an "IF" orientation to our teaching. IF we apply this new technology, what are the consequences? IF I believe this, what difference will it make? IF these programs are implemented, what will occur? Many courses in other disciplines address themselves to this "IF" orientation directly or indirectly--courses in literature, philosophy, psychology, etc. In none, however, is this orientation more appropriate than in speech communication where the teaching of critical thinking has long been recognized as imperative. The appraisal of evidence, the drawing of inferences, the probing of alternatives, and the making of judgments with human values and attitudes appropriately considered, etc. are essential elements of the well-taught course in speech.

The acquisition of new knowledge is important, but the ability to think critically about what we know is imperative if we are to silence the confusion of tongues.

I approach the discussion of the third neglected aim of

education with reluctance--not because I feel it is unimportant, but because I feel it is so important and at the same time so susceptible to being misunderstood. I speak of the development of those qualities we often lump together as "character." In light of the unprecedented political developments in our nation in the past few months and the alledged causality, I need no real defense for urging that we reassert our concern for those inner components of man "which result in outer efforts that evidence loyalty to discriminating standards of value."[9] The essential minimum standards are associated with what Ordway Tead describes as, "a certain sincerity, integrity, direction, self-responsibility, and self-consistency of behavior directed toward ends which have personal and social validity. . . ."[10]

We have come to realize in recent months that ours is the kind of society and form of government which cannot survive without dependence upon the widespread assumption of integrity. Since this is true, then ours is a society in which the development of character cannot be left wholly to chance. Huston Smith makes this point forcefully when he insists, "If true values do exist, not to help our students discover them is to leave them prey to false ones."[11] I am aware of the danger here. As teachers we resist influencing student values, but other agents of society have no such reluctance.

Teachers of oral discourse have recognized from the time of Aristotle that while rhetoric may be amoral the rhetorician-speaker need not be. The Roman concept of the orator as a "good man skilled in speaking" is another reflection of our basic understanding of the importance of character in responsible oral discourse. Therefore, I would urge that the ancient tradition of linking ethical and other value related concerns with the study of speech be strengthened. In the best Socratic tradition we must help students discover where the "good" lies.

I have great optimism for the future of the discipline of speech communication, for I am convinced that the teacher of speech has a rare opportunity to stress the unitary nature of knowledge, promote the habit of critical and reflective thinking, and, as Tead suggests, "be sure that integrity, honor, courage, truth-seeking and a sense of public obligation are. . .built into the very fibre of the leaders of the next generation."[12]

If we can undertake these educational tasks with willing hands, we may yet raise up clear young voices to disspell the confusion of tongues--the babble from Babel.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Northrop Frye, The Educated Imagination (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1971), pp. 55-56.

[2]Richard Livingston, On Education (New York: Macmillan Company, 1944), p. 31.

[3]Ordway Tead, Education for Character, Hazen Pamphlets, No. 22 (New Haven, Connecticut: Hazen Foundation, 1947), p.5.

[4]Kenneth E. Boulding, The Meaning of the Twentieth Century (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 23.

[5]Archibald MacLeish, "The Great American Frustration," Saturday Review, LI (July 13, 1968) 16.

[6]Harry Ransom, "Gaps and Overlaps in Education," Honors Day address, University of Texas, Austin, March 30, 1968.

[7]See Charles J. Miller, "Interdisciplinary Contributions to Speech Research," Review of Educational Research, XXXIV (April, 1968), 164-176.

[8]Marjorie Carpenter (ed.), The Larger Learning (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Company, 1960), p. xv.

[9]Tead, p. 6.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Huston Smith, "Values: Academic and Human," The Larger Learning, ed. by Marjorie Carpenter (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Company, 1960), p. 19

[12]Tead, p. 15.

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